

FUNCTIONAL AMBIGUITY

and the

CUSHIONING OF ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS

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Theorizing about organizational behavior is replete with concepts that, implicitly and explicitly, attribute great virtue to clarity in prescribing the actions of individual organization members. Specificity of task assignment, precise knowledge of lines of authority, discipline, bureaucracy, control, -these and many other concepts rest on the notion that ambiguity is to be regarded as a fly in the ointment of organizational effectiveness. Nor is this anti-ambiguity leitmotif confined entirely to the more traditional theories; views that organizational objectives should be communicated as clearly as possible and that people "should know where they stand", have wide currency.

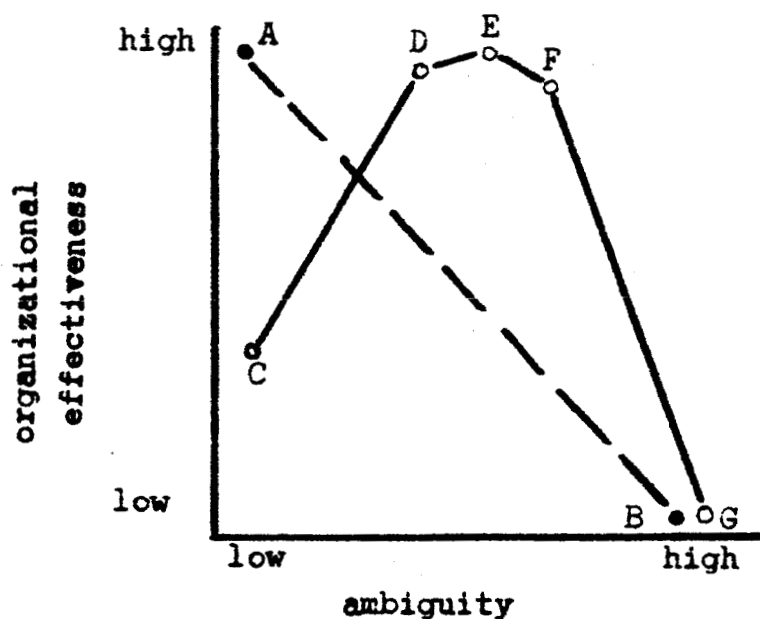
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On the other hand, there has been little systematic focus on the concept of "ambiguity" in organizational theory (witness, for instance its rare appearance in indexes of the relevant texts.)(1) Especially, the positive aspects of ambiguity, notably its function in cushioning organizational stress, has been treated only sporadically.

This paper proposes that the relationship between clarity-ambiguity on one hand, and organizational effectiveness on the other is necessarily complex, and that it becomes appropriate to develop a set of propositions specifying when ambiguity may be friend, rather than assuming uniformly that it is foe.

Diagram I suggests the general shape of the function relating ambiguity to organizational effectiveness under some hypothetical ceteris paribus condition. Rather than the linear relationship that often is assumed to prevail, the function more likely is curvilinear: if ambiguity is extremely low (e.g. in circumstances of

(1) An important exception: Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, Formal Organizations, San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1962, espec. p. 198 and p. 240-242. Also, aspects of the work of Melville Dalton and Elliott Jaques pertain.



A-----B conventional assumption
C D E F G probable curvilinear pattern
 D E F functional ambiguity range
 E optimal ambiguity point

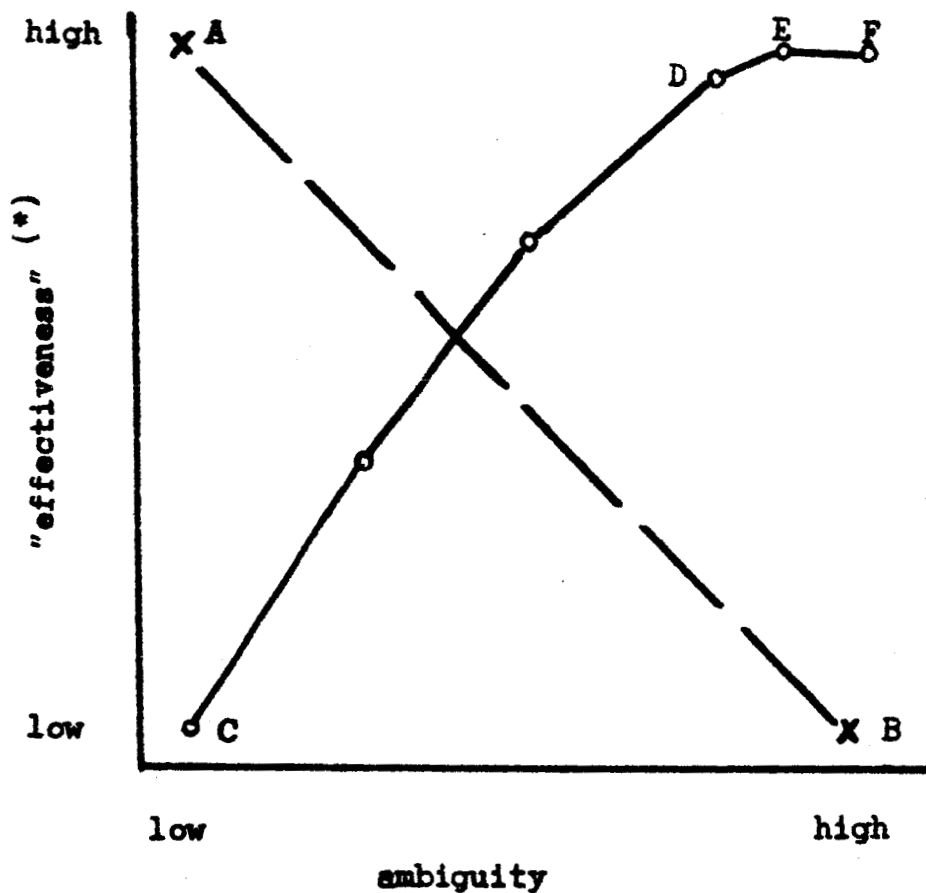
DIAGRAM I

A GENERAL AMBIGUITY FUNCTION

fish-bowl like clarity), effectiveness is relatively low (though probably not rock-bottom); if ambiguity is extremely high (e.g. when all is a mad, wild jumble of uncertainty), organizational effectiveness falls to its nadir. But at some intermediate point in ambiguity, organizational effectiveness is optimized.

The following argument is presented in defense of this relationship: too little ambiguity makes it impossible for individuals and organizational subsystems to "roll with the punch" of changing, and often themselves ambiguous, organizational performance requirements; such dearth of ambiguity promotes conflict because it leaves no room for potentially opposing individuals or organizational subsystems to back off, or to meet half-way, within a no-mans land of "functional ambiguity". Too much ambiguity severely impedes organizational effectiveness by creating overwhelming anxiety for the individuals and by obscuring guidelines necessary for organizational survival. However, between these two extremes falls a range of ambiguity levels that, for a given set of circumstances (such as economic constraints, socio-technical patterns, time pressures, etc.) is indeed adaptive as viewed from the standpoint of organization and/or individual. Within this range of functional ambiguity it may be possible to establish empirically an optimal ambiguity point, as may be found to exist at a given time.

Considerations of formal theory aside, operating managers tend to accept a folklore that attaches positive value to clarity and explicitness in matters pertaining to organizational behavior. At any rate, they sense that the folkways require public espousal of an anti-ambiguity position. Yet, in many instances public espousal and private belief are anything but congruent. Many a skilled manager is an expert in the ambiguity game (Diagram II): he will enunciate the principle that, after all, important aspects of organizational operation (lines of authority, procedures, policies, etc.) should be clearly spelled out... if he senses that, pragmatically, this will strengthen his position. At the same time, he will seek to leave unstated and suitably vague those matters with respect to which he desires "breathing room". Depending on the issue, and as a function of various power and competitive relations, other managers, at peer, superior or subordinate levels, may enter into a "collusive" relationship with a given manager who engages in the "ambiguity game", encouraging a potentially functional ambiguity state (as defined by individual or sub-organizational objectives), or they may seek to counter his moves, urging clarity where he seeks the comforting veil of vagueness.



A ----- B manager enunciates conventional assumption

C D E F manager seeks ambiguity ("breathing room")

(*) defined in term of perceptions of specific manager;
organizational effectiveness needs to be described
by separate function.

DIAGRAM II

THE AMBIGUITY GAME

Joint support for a given ambiguity state by two or more managers is the example par excellence of the use of ambiguity as a cushion against organizational stress. Under these conditions, if ambiguity is maintained to the eyes of persons outside, the managers concerned create a situation where one may act as a "foil" for the other, i.e. they maintain an external image of ambiguity as to just who was responsible for a particular decision. A similar process operates with the use of committees as a kind of "black box" device, to obscure to an 'outsider' the "actual" decision locus. In connection with conflict between the organization and an outsider, this involves a trade-off: how much further conflict will be generated by the existence of a frustrated outsider who has no recourse, as against the question: how much organizational energy will need to be committed to the task of "working through" a particular problem with specific decision-makers within the organization.

In terms of intra-organizational stress, joint support for an ambiguity state makes it possible for the managers involved to establish appropriate compromises in areas such as task definitions and assumption of responsibility. In relations to superiors or others outside the particular organizational sub-system, the

managers may arrive at arbitrary role assignments, along functional or other administrative lines, e.g. "Joe is in charge of the budget end; I take care of the technical stuff"... (in reality, both may be intimately involved in both functions.)

The following are some case examples illustrating joint support for ambiguity states that may prove helpful to organizational functioning:

Case A: The co-managing directors of a large British textile firm

In a large British textile firm top responsibility is lodged in two, not in the customary single managing officer. By way of formal prescription, it is indicated that both men equally share overall executive responsibility and authority. Their division of labor is purposively left ambiguous. While, in fact, certain primary functions are usually performed by one or the other of the two men, there are many instances that involve a reshuffling of the decision-making locus. Such modification of procedure is employed especially when it is convenient to do so

in order to satisfy a customer or other organizational outsider. Further, under changing conditions, the co-managing officers may recognize that the skills of one or the other are more suitable for undertaking a particular administrative task. The personality structures of the co-managing directors are such that neither threatens the other, and that there appears little need for one or the other to defend a particular decision or area of authority and responsibility.

Case B: The associate executive directors
of a large social welfare agency.

As another example, in a large social welfare agency, the top executive position had been left vacant following the merger of two previously autonomous organizations. The lay committee charged with the responsibility of selecting a new executive believed that neither of the incumbent directors of the to-be-merged agencies was suitable for the new position. Tacitly, though reluctantly, this view was shared

by the incumbent executives, and neither saw fit to marshal his resources to make a "push" for the top job. Rather, they agreed to leave the matter of final executive responsibility ambiguous - not by a formal statement of procedure, but by the development by the series of practices that facilitated informal distribution of executive functions. Each executive assumed certain major tasks, and decisions affecting the total organization were evolved by joint process and consensus. Had an occasion arisen in which a deadlock might have occurred, a final determination probably would have been made by the lay president of the organization. However, the process of exchange of view, and search for agreement was such that this exigency was avoided. Further, it must be noted that each of the executives had an important stake in "making the arrangement work". Having avoided the "moment of truth" that would have required the choice of one over the other of the men for the top position,

it now seemed incumbent upon them to demonstrate that the development of an "associate executive director" system involving both of them, could work effectively.

There are innumerable other instances in which ambiguity plays a potentially adaptive role.... to list a few, in more-or-less staccato fashion:

Case C:
Government
Research

* 'while dealing with sensitive subject matter it's often better to "just talk" about things, ("ambiguity"), without pinning them down in writing, ("clarity").' (2)

A quote by an executive of a large government agency who has recently entered government service from private industry: "They are always trying to get me to write things down and to give me a lot of forms. When I have to, I do what's necessary, but when I don't want to be tied down too hard I rather tell people what I want them to do. Actually, I think that this is better for the organization. Sometimes, things

(2) This is a relative matter, of course. The point is that "talk" may leave wider latitude and openness, while "writing it down", though also potentially ambiguous, does provide a specific record as a baseline for future deliberation.

change and if I wrote everything down, I'd be in trouble".

Case D:
Willowend
Savings and
Loan

- * 'to use the talents of a member of a board of directors in an active line capacity, the specific working arrangement between the board member and the line managing officer is left undefined.'

Willowend Savings and Loan Association has on its board a director who, although he was trained in a rather different field, has become an expert in multiple dwelling residential construction. The professional managing officer of the association is not too happy about what he considers to be "interference" by board members who, after all, "are supposed to establish policy without getting into the day-by-day operation of the organization". Yet, he too realizes (reluctantly) that this director's capacities would be useful to the attainment of organizational goals. To place the director on the payroll would be unacceptable in terms of the accepted authority relationship. To neglect use of his skills would be

organizationally wasteful. On the other hand, to leave the situation ambiguous seems to be quite functional: the director's talents are utilized in something of a consultant role, the authority structure is not upset, and the amount of threat inherent in the relationship between the director and the managing officer is held within workable bounds.

Case E:
Bureau of Youth
Education

* 'the executive of an educational unit in a community welfare institution claims that he does not know who his boss is. He is advised to leave well enough alone.'

The following excerpt of conversation summarizes the relationship:

Educational Executive: When I want a policy decision on some things, I don't know with whom I should be talking. Is it supposed to be Zidnetz, or should I be talking with Sobart?

Consultant: Does this bother you?

Educational Executive: I guess not. At least not usually. But I guess it can be a problem once in a while.

Consultant: So why don't you leave matters as they are? This way you have a choice and you can talk to whoever seems to be the most appropriate guy to deal with.

This, of course, represents an example of evolution of functional authority relationships which frequently involve a degree of ambiguity - especially as functions shift in response to changes in the internal and external environment of the organization.

Ambiguity is, after all, the effluvium that makes projective tests what they are. Perhaps there are conditions under which projection of personally desired modes of operation into aspects of the organization, acting as though they were "Rorschach plates", provides the very flexibility that the organization requires to absorb stress. Very few, if any, structurally rigid organisms survive for very long. Perhaps it becomes necessary at this time to carve out a specific area of inquiry on organizational ambiguity, with the mission to delineate the combinations of variables that characterize functional, dysfunctional and optimum ambiguity types. Methodologically, the problem may be approached by modifications of the Multi-relational Sociometric Survey (Tannenbaum, Weschler and Massarik, 1953, 1961), and by the employment of projective devices, exploring how people really view the organization of which they are a part.